

# Tathra Wharf



19 January 2008

# *Tathra and the wharf*

Tathra has a special place in the history of the south coast of New South Wales. Cargo vessels called there from the 1850s and by 1890 when the Illawarra Steam Navigation Company (ISNC) ran a weekly service, it was the main port for the far south coast. 'On the headland above the wharf there was a shipping office and a post office, with the large and imposing Ocean View Hotel where horse drawn coaches waited to meet the ships and take passengers to Bega, centre of the farming district

'As well as the cheese and other produce and livestock sent to Sydney, intercolonial steamers called at Tathra wharf to load prime live pigs, fattened on dairy surplus and maize grown on the alluvial soils of the Bega River flats and at Pambula and Merimbula. This major export cargo gave the name 'pig and whistle fleet' to

the ISNC's south coast steamers, which were said to wait an hour for a pig, but not one minute for a passenger.'<sup>1</sup>

Tathra wharf was the gateway to the rich Bega Valley and the Monaro District that lay beyond, when coastal shipping was for over 80 years a vital link between the isolated settlements of the far south coast and the outside world. However, with improved roads the coastal trade declined from the 1920s with the last ship taking freight from Tathra in November 1954.

1. *Between Wind & Water – a history of the ports and coastal waterways of New South Wales* by Lenore Coltheart



Tathra wharf in 1968 (photo courtesy Doug Boleyn)  
INSET: Unloading cheese at Tathra wharf circa 1920 (courtesy Bega Pioneer Museum)

## *Aboriginal cultural significance*

The Aboriginal communities of the Monaro and Yuin Nation have an association with this area going back at least 6000 years.

Tathra wharf and headland reserve is located within the Djirringanj language area of the Monaro and Yuin nations and has been used by current and previous generations, including the traditional owners, for a variety of activities.

Traditional language was and remains very important to the various tribes and clans of the Monaro and Yuin people to interact and keep the bloodlines thick.

In the 1880's the Monaro/Ngarigo Aboriginal people were droving brumbies from the Snowy Mountains to the wharf for transportation to Sydney.

The brumbies would be brought down by stockmen including Jack Mundy, Bill Mundy and other members of the Mundy family, and Jack Hoskins. The horses

were rested for a few days at an Aboriginal reserve near Coens Lake now known as Blackfellows Lake at Kalaru before being taken to the steamer wharf at Tathra.

The reserve at Kalaru was large in area and was also used by the Aboriginal people to produce crops for the markets in Sydney. And, Aboriginal people worked on farms in the area helping grow and harvest produce, as well as working in the timber and fishing industry.

European settlement commenced in 1820 and the local aboriginal community, the Djirringanj people, played a significant role in regional agricultural pursuits which provided much of the produce sent from the wharf.

The Tathra headland and surrounding areas remain a place of Aboriginal cultural heritage significance. These places continue to provide a venue for celebrations and events for all the community.



Tathra beach seen from the headland above the wharf.



# *How the wharf developed*

Before Tathra Wharf was built vessels moored off shore and passengers, freight and stock were transferred to and from the beach in small flat bottomed boats, from place's like Tathra, Kangarutha and Kianninny.

Following representations to the colonial government in Sydney, a grant of £400 was given in 1861 for the construction of a wharf at Tathra.

The selected site on the northern side of Tathra Head was the only one suitable for a deepwater wharf along the 80km stretch of coastline from Merimbula north to Bermagui.

The wharf opened in 1862 and was gradually enlarged as trade developed and

vessels increased in size. Between 1862 and 1913 it became a large rectangle 45m long, with a face 37m wide. By then the facilities included a large two-storey cargo shed, a cattle race, a 3 ton derrick crane, on-deck and under-deck loading ramps and chutes, and a buffer fendering system.

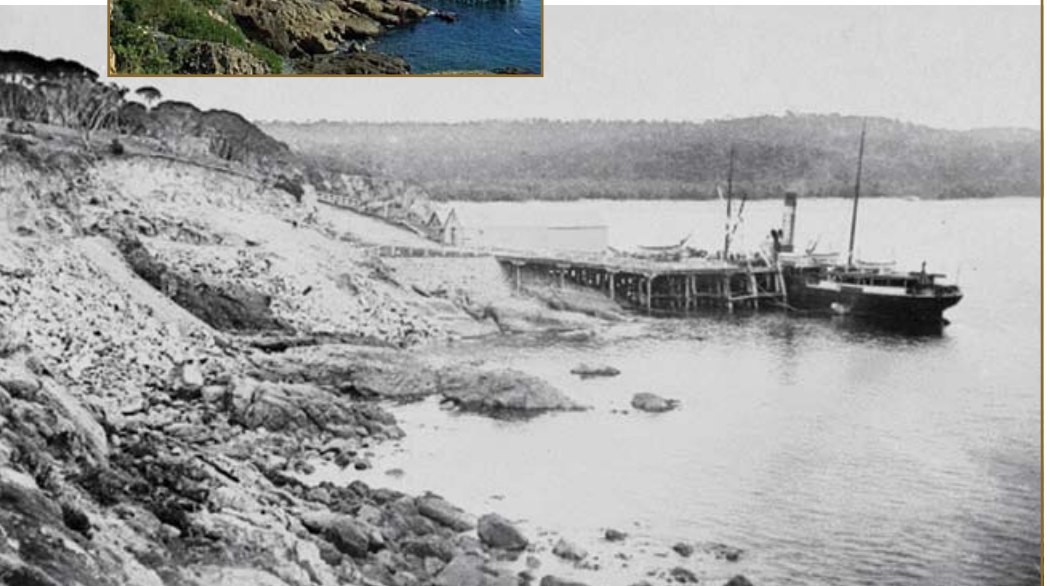
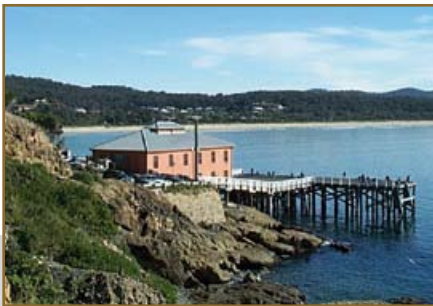
Throughout its working life Tathra Wharf was the responsibility of the NSW Department of Public Works.

The heyday of the wharf was between the 1880s and 1920s when several vessels a week called in for cargo and passengers.

However, with improved roads the coastal trade declined from the 1920s with the last ship taking freight from Tathra in November 1954.

After the coastal trade finished the wharf fell into disrepair due to the harsh marine environment and lack of maintenance.

The Bega Valley Shire Library, Local and Family History Section has a detailed history of the wharf including newspaper cuttings of the day, construction drawings and photographs.



Tathra wharf prior to 1907 (photo courtesy NSW State Library)  
INSET: Tathra wharf as it is today

# *Why the wharf is important*

From the early days of the colony and until roads were constructed to the borders north and south from Sydney, shipping was the means by which settlements developed and passengers, goods and produce were conveyed into and out of these areas. It was the only of means of communication with isolated communities; coastal shipping was their vital link with the outside world and essential to their survival.

At one time there were over 15 open coast timber wharves in New South Wales with a few in other States. Tathra Wharf is the last that survives on the eastern seaboard of Australia. It is only one of six timber wharves listed on the Register of the National Estate, and being of State heritage significance it is also listed on the NSW State Heritage Register.

As the wharf and its cargo shed are also significant engineering heritage structures, together they have been recognised by the Institution of Engineers Australia as a National Engineering Landmark, with plaques fixed to the 1908 cargo shed.

In essence the wharf incorporating the cargo shed is a significant heritage structure because:

- it is a relic of a transport system that played an integral role in the settlement and development of the colony of NSW and in particular, the towns of the Bega Valley and those of the Monaro;
- it was the main shipping point on the NSW far South Coast for produce from the rich Bega Valley and reflects Tathra's importance as the area's prime transport access point during the era of coastal shipping;
- it was a barometer of the economic development of Tathra, the Bega Valley and the Monaro District when shipping was their only trade and communication link to the outside world;

- it is an important example of a timber wharf from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It reveals aspects of construction and design practices in the engineering of timber marine structures over a 150 year period from the 1860s. Although of simple design the cargo shed is a fine example of marine architecture and displays elements of high quality workmanship and timber construction methods;
- the wharf and cargo shed are important relics for those researching the construction of heavy timber maritime structures and their maintenance;
- it is evidence of a working wharf from a by gone era;
- it is an example of the successful conservation of a timber marine structure in a harsh environment;
- it was constructed under E O Moriarty one of the most important colonial engineers and was extended by E M de Burgh another eminent colonial engineer, both of whom were at one time Engineer-in-Chief of the Harbours and River Navigation Branch of the NSW Department of Public Works;
- it is an excellent demonstration of what can be achieved through determined heritage advocacy and activism.



Detail of the door track and 'pegged' rafters.

Sydney  
5 hours from Tathra →

Cobargo

**BERMAGUI**

• Quaama

← Canberra  
3 hours from Tathra

Bemboka

**BEGA**

Candelo

Kalaru

● **TATHRA**

• Wolumla

Wyndham

• **MERIMBULA**

Towamba •

**EDEN**

Melbourne →  
7 hours from Tathra





Set like a gem into shades of green and blue, Tathra surrounds itself in the natural beauty of both Mimosa Rocks National Park to the north, and Bournda National Park to the south, home to many seabirds such as the endangered little tern and an abundance of wildlife.

The coastal town is rich in history and traditions of the sea.

Tathra wharf is still a centre of activity today, creating a focus for visitors and those wanting to cast a line. It is the only remaining sea wharf on the East Coast.

While the wharf stands proud above the waters, below is a wonderland for scuba divers and snorkellers. Fur seals and fairy penguins from the colony on Montague Island sometimes frequent the waters around the Wharf and are quite willing to let you be a part of their underwater world.

Dolphins are regular visitors to this area, and from September through to late November whales are a common sight.



# *Saving the wharf*

In 1973 for reasons of safety and the cost of maintenance, the NSW Department of Public Works planned to demolish the wharf. The prospect of losing their beloved wharf galvanised the local community and with the National Trust of Australia [NSW] it formed the Tathra Wharf Action Movement. The prime organisers of the Movement were retired schoolteachers Ray and Daisy Bearlin. With structural engineer Colin Crisp as its heritage advisor the Movement took up the cudgels to retain the wharf and was successful in having the decision overturned.

In 1978 Imlay Shire and Bega Municipal Councils together with the National Trust were appointed by the government as trustees of the wharf with responsibility for its restoration and preservation and of the cargo shed.

Since that time the community, Bega Valley Shire Council and the National Trust have raised funds from the community and State and Federal governments to restore the wharf and cargo shed. Up to 2007 over \$2 million had been spent on restoration to conserve the town's unique connection with its past.

The wharf is now an important tourist destination and a mecca for recreational fishermen.



Tathra wharf in 1978 (photo courtesy Colin Crisp)  
INSET: Decayed wharf timbers prior to restoration.



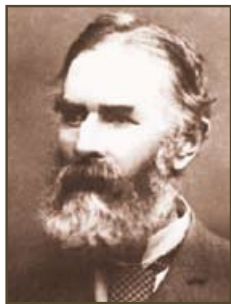


ABOVE and LEFT:  
Major engineering work being done on the wharf



Tathra Wharf after the restoration.

## *The people involved*



**Ernest Orpen Moriarty** (1825 96) was the first Engineer in Chief of the Harbours & River Navigation Branch of the NSW Public Works Department. From 1858 and up until his retirement in 1888 he was responsible for the many important harbour and river improvement works in the colony of NSW. He was an exceptional engineer whose achievements included the design of improvements to the entrances of the Richmond and Clarence Rivers, for Morts Dock at Balmain, Sutherland Dock on Cockatoo Island, the first Pyrmont bridge, the Upper Nepean Water Supply Scheme, Lake Parramatta Dam and the design of Newcastle Harbour.

The last two, together with Tathra wharf have been declared National Engineering Landmarks.



**Ernest Macartney de Burgh** (1863 1929) was one of Australia's foremost engineers of the late colonial period and the early 20th century. In the NSW Department of Public Works he was associated with many major bridges and was a member of the Sydney Harbour Bridge Advisory Board.

As Principal Engineer for Rivers, Water Supply and Drainage he was responsible for the design and construction of Cataract Dam and was associated with Burrinjuck Dam, both of which are National Engineering Landmarks.

As Chief Engineer for Water Supply and Sewerage he was responsible for Sydney's Cordeaux, Avon and Nepean Dams, for Newcastle's Chichester Dam and for Broken Hill's Umberumberka Dam. He represented NSW on the Conference of Engineers whose report led to the construction of Hume Dam and locks and weirs along the River Murray. These works have collectively been designated as a National Engineering Landmark.

De Burgh twice won the prestigious Telford premium of the Institution of Civil Engineers, London.

### **The NSW Public Works Department NSW Harbours and River Navigation Branch.**

Along with responsible government for the colony of New South Wales, the Ministry of Lands and Public Works was established in 1856. The Department of Public Works was established as a separate authority in 1858.

One of four Branches, the Harbours and River Navigation Branch of the Department was responsible for: the investigation, design and construction of harbour works; port facilities for the primary ports of Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong and the many coastal outports such as Tathra; inland river ports; river clearing; river training and flood mitigation works for coastal and inland rivers; dredging of shipping channels; reclamation of land for port works; and the design, construction and operation of lighthouses and pilot stations.



**Colin Crisp** was a highly respected consulting structural engineer and building conservationist with a special talent for determining the condition of buildings and other

structures. From 1964 until his death in 1992 he often worked in an honorary capacity for the National Trust. In this role he was influential in assisting with the preservation of the State's built heritage including Tathra wharf which would otherwise have been lost.

In 1986 Crisp was awarded the Silver Medallion by the National Trust in recognition of his services.

Engineers Australia has also established the Colin Crisp Award for excellence in engineering heritage endeavour.



**Ray and Daisy Bearlin** were two retirees who developed a great love for Tathra. When demolition of Tathra wharf was threatened they, together with Claire Lupton galvanized

the Tathra community into action forming the Tathra Wharf Action Movement (TWAM). TWAM gained the active support of the local community and holiday visitors in the initial fundraising and in petitioning of the NSW government to retain the wharf.

The restored wharf is a tribute to the determination of the Bearlins, the local community and the others who helped to save the wharf as a significant part of Tathra's history and heritage.

## *Significant events*

- 1820–1840** Far south coast of NSW settled.
- 1855** Jetty constructed at Merimbula Bay
- 1858** Illawarra Steam Navigation Co [ISNC] formed.
- 1858** Daniel Gowing developed Kangarutha and then Kianniny as shipping points.
- 1860** Tathra proclaimed as a settlement.
- 1861–1862** Construction of jetty authorised by NSW government with £400 expenditure approved; jetty opened 12 June 1862. PS Mimosa the first ship to moor.
- 1862** ISNC donates money to construction of a cargo shed.
- 1868** Ships calling fortnightly.
- 1873** Jetty widened to 18ft to east, derrick crane installed & two-storey cargo shed built on shore end of wharf.
- 1874** Public Works Department assumes responsibility for the wharf.
- 1878–1909** 'T' end added to wharf to accommodate larger vessels; cost £1,217.
- 1884** Gazetted as a Public Wharf.
- 1891** Additional cargo shed built in front of 1873 shed.
- 1901–1902** Approaches to wharf head widened to width of 'T' head.
- 1906** Wharf proclaimed a National Work.
- 1907–1909** Existing cargo sheds demolished and new two-storey cargo shed built.
- 1908** Cattle yards constructed.
- 1912–1913** Wharf extended and widened by contractor Oakes & Oakes £7317 and freestanding passenger shelter shed built (50ft x 30ft).
- 1914** Recruits from Bega leave for the Great War.
- 1919** Single storey cargo shed built on seaward end of existing shed.
- 1927** Passenger ship SS Merimbula wrecked. off Beecroft Head near Jervis Bay
- 1943** Wharf wired for demolition in event of enemy landing in World War 2.
- 1954** Last cargo ship leaves wharf.
- 1973** Public Works Department proposes demolition of wharf.
- 1973** Tathra Wharf Action Movement formed.
- 1978** Tathra Wharf Trust formed and gains lease to occupy and restore the wharf.
- 1980** Listed on Register of National Estate.
- 1982** Cargo shed restored.
- 1987–2006** Restoration of wharf carried out in three further stages.



*A National  
Engineering Landmark*



## Engineers Australia's commemorative plaque

Works recognised by the Institution of Engineers as National Engineering Landmarks are identified by two plaques: a circular bronze disk with the Institution's logo in the centre with 'National Engineering Landmark' around the rim, and a rectangular bronze information plaque that describes the work and the reason why it is regarded as a significant heritage item.

The information plaque for Tathra wharf bears the following inscription:

### Tathra Wharf

Tathra is the only open sea timber wharf on Australia's East Coast surviving from the coastal steamer trade era. Critical to development of the far South Coast of NSW, the wharf dates from 1862. With its facilities it was progressively upgraded, remaining in service until 1954. The wharf exhibits techniques in the design and maintenance of heavy timber marine structures of the NSW Public Works Department over the period. It is associated with eminent engineers E O Moriarty and E M de Burgh, and the builder Oakes & Oakes.

**The Institution of Engineers Australia,  
Bega Valley Shire Council,  
Community of Tathra.  
2008**



**ENGINEERS  
AUSTRALIA**



**Bega Valley Shire Council**